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On Vico's Humanistic Educational Thoughts From the Perspective of Etymology

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Abstract

Etymology is conducive to extract the root for the true. In virtue of the philosophy of principle of “the true itself is made” (verum is factum), concisely, Vico's educational thoughts are deciphered in the perspective of etymology, at great length: education by nature, proper relation between sense and intellect, harmonious education between body and mind, stressed moral education as well. A succinct revelation to our time, in conclusion, has been obtained, they are: Observing the nature of children is the enception; Cultivating the creativity is the lifeline; Harmony is the key; Becoming a person is the aim; Selecting freely is the path.

Key words Vico; Educational thoughts; Humanity; Nature

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1. Introduction

Nowadays, rationalism education has lead to numerous malpractice due to the absence of examining the essence of education. We, however, could look into the origin of education from the prospective of etymology, for “etymology” is *veriloquium* in Latin,¹ which means “truth”, while in Greek is *etumologia* with the meaning “narrating the fact or deriving it”.²

Plato known as “the founder of etymology” in the Ancient West is the first person to study etymology.³ Others scholars such as Morgan, Marx, Engels and Paul Lafargue also attached the importance of etymology. However, Vico, the famous Italian scholar, is the first person who investigated etymology systematically. In his book “*On the Most Ancient Italic Wisdom*”, he reconstructed ancient Italic wisdom through the etymological and semantic analysis of the Latin vocabulary, in order to detect therein the elements of a true epistemology and ontology. In *the New Science*, etymology is the music teaching us to hear the birth of language and institutions. It is not surprising that etymology would become, for Vico, a way to discover how both thoughts and institutions develop. Firstly, etymology is the “rarity fossil” of investigating the ancient society. From Vico's view, “name” and “character” have the same meaning. Secondly, not only explaining history, but also taking history as a mirror is an aim of etymology study.

¹Vico.G.(1744). *The New Science of Giambattista Vico*(T.G. Bergin, & M.H.Fisch,Trans.).Ithaca.(1968). Para.403(Hereafter NS.with paragraph numbers).

²Eric·P·Happ.(1994). On Etymology(Rong Pei,Trans.). *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*.75(1),10-15.

³F. R. Palmer.(1976).*Semantics: A new outline*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.10; W.Thomson. (1960).*The History of Linguistics Before the late Nineteenth Century*. Marrickville NSW: Science Press, pp.8-11;R.H.Robins. A Short History of Linguistics. London: Langman Press,1976, pp.17-18.

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The Foundation of Vico's Humanistic Thoughts

In Vico's days, new movement had received its philosophical and scientific baptism at the hands of Telesio, Bruno, Campanella and Bacon, who devoted their lives to seeking the liberation of humanity. Science was conceived together with the discovery of relationships between physical phenomena. Under the influence of the trend, Descartes proposed his view in the very first rule in his *Method*: "The first of these rules was to accept nothing as true which I did not clearly recognize to be so: that is to say, carefully to avoid precipitation and prejudice in judgements, and to accept in them nothing more than what was presented to my mind so clearly and distinctly that I could have no occasion to doubt it."⁴ Their age, therefore, is an age when everything was said clearly and concisely. Descartes' clear and certain truth view exerts significant influence on that age. Based on this, mathematical method was regarded as the most effective one. "Descartes was in effect recommending that all thoughts, to be worthy of the name, must approximate to this mathematical ideal."⁵ Vico's view, however, is significantly different from Descartes's. He took the view that "This world of nations has certainly been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind."⁶ Man's knowledge of his creation is certainty due to the fact that he "owns" the epistemic and emotive elements that constitute his creations.⁷ Vico supposes here that human creations and actions can be universal in their significance because they are the expressions of a common human nature. The center of Vico's idea, is his conviction that the true (verum) and the made (factum) are convertible, that is, the only thing that we can know for sure is what ourselves have made or created. It is the extraordinary creed that Vico embraces. Based on Vico's philosophy, words like *educare* or *educere* or *humare* will be traced back to find a true meaning of education, within the history or myth.

Vico's Humanistic Educational Thoughts

Vico's age was torn between traditional humanistic education and the new education, which advocated the analytical method. Vico criticized the disadvantages of both opinions and asserted his educational standpoints on the perspective of etymology.

Education by Nature

The main principle of *New Science* is "nature" and "spontaneous". Vico asserted them, saying "Things do not settle or endure out of their natural state."⁸ Spontaneity is distinctly associated with poetic creation. Bruner and John Dewey agree this view.

Memory, imagination, imitation and wonder, "the four things are all most necessary for the culture of the best humanity."⁹ This axiom is the principle of the expressiveness of the poetic images that the world formed in its first childhood. Vico sets forth his etymological proof: "Memory is the same as imagination, which for that reason is reason is called '*memoria*' in Latin...Imagination is likewise taken for ingenuity or invention."¹⁰ Children memory is memory is most vigorous, and their imagination is therefore excessively vivid, because imagination is nothing but but extended or compounded memory. Vico compared the children with extraordinary gift in imitation with the world world in its infancy composed of poetic nations, which is nothing but imitation to argue their ideas. Besides, the children are the primary barbarians own the wonder. Wonder is the daughter of ignorance. Vico's belief that education should be founded on this natural order of stages is true. However, Cartesian rationalism poses a threat to to the humanity. The practice based on rationalism obscures their imagination, enfeebles their memory, renders their their perception sluggish, and slackens their understanding. It is a fact that Vico pleads for an education which would would conform with nature.

⁴ R.Descartes.(1637).*Discourse on Method*(E. S. Haldane , & G. R. T. Ross. trans.).Philosophical Works(Vol.I). New York(1931),p. 92.

⁵ Stuart Hampshire.(1969).Vico and the contemporary philosophy of language. In G.Tagliacozzo, & H. V. White (Eds.),*Giambattista Vico : an international symposium*(pp.476-477). Baltimore : Johns Hopkins Press.

⁶ NS,para.,349.

⁷ NS,para.,6-15.

⁸ NS,para.,134.

⁹ NS,Para.124.

¹⁰ NS,para.,819.

Proper Relationship Between Sense and Intellect

Poetic wisdom is the lifeblood of the New Science, and is the root of the civilization. Wisdom is from the Latin word “*divinari*”, which means “divinity”. Then what is poetic wisdom? In brief, it is poetic or creative, common or vulgar wisdom, wisdom common to whole peoples. Men have made this world of nations by themselves. They build better than they knew. Hence “poetic wisdom, the first wisdom of the gentile world, must have begun with a metaphysics not rational and abstract like that of learned men now, but felt and imagined as that of these first men must have been, who, without power of ratiocination, were all robust sense and vigorous imagination.”¹¹ The importance of imagination and irration links strongly. It should be noted that poetic wisdom is comprised of sense and intellect. Nevertheless, the proper order between them should be attached. Putting the incidental before the fundamental, surely, is improper. Hence, men at first feel didn’t perceive, and then they perceived with a troubled and agitated spirit. Finally they reflected with a clear mind. It is the appropriate consequence between sense and intellect that Vico provided.

Next, in the light of “observe” and “logic” of Vico’s etymology, the proper relationship between sense and intellect will be discussed furthermore in the paper. Vico asserted, “Thus in their science of augury the Romans used the verb *contemplari* for observing the parts of the sky where the auguries came or the auspices were taken. These regions, marked out by the augurs with their wands, were called temples of the sky (*templa coeli*), where must have come to the Greeks their first *theōrēmata* and *mathēmata*, things divine or sublime to contemplate, which eventuated in metaphysical and mathematical abstractions.”¹² Hence, no matter the applied science or the speculative science, actually, root in imaginary. Another example is on the etymology of “logic”. “Logic” comes from logos, whose first and proper meaning was *fabula* (means fable), and were carried over into Italian as *favella* (means speech). In Greek the fable was also called *mythos*, myth, whence comes the Latin *mutus*, mute. For speech was born in mute times as mental[or sign] language, which Strago in a golden passage says existed before vocal or articulate [language]... whence *logos* meant also deed to the Hebrews and thing to the Greeks... Similarly, *mythos* came to be defined for us as *vera narration*, or true speech...¹³ Therefore, the logic used for studying objective law is inferred to derive from language, which is originated from fable, whose first meaning is mute, true narration. Therefore, we believe that vulgar or creative wisdom is the origin and presupposition of all sciences and all philosophies. It’s grounded of Vico to criticize modern education, on account of its disorder.

Harmonious Education Between Body and Mind

Vico has set forth how the founders of gentile humanity in a certain sense generated and produced by themselves the proper human form in its two aspects. The first aspect is how they brought forth the form of our just corporature from their giant bodies the form of our just corporature by means of frightful religions and terrible paternal powers and sacred ablutions. The second aspect is how they brought forth the form of our human mind from their bestial minds by discipline of their household economy. Hence, body education is in rapport with mind education. The etymology about the two words are explored as, “The heroes apprehended with human senses those two truths which make up the whole of economic doctrine, and which were preserved in the two Latin verbs *educere* and *educare*. In the prevailing best usage the first of these applies to the education of the spirit and the second to that of the body. The first, by a learned metaphor, was transferred by the natural philosophers to the bringing forth of forms from matter. For heroic education began to bring forth in a certain way the form of the human soul which had been completely submerged in the huge bodies of the giants, and began likewise to bring forth the form of the human body itself in its just dimensions from the disproportionate giant bodies.”¹⁴ How to transfer the giant to the proper body? In Vico’s view, “the [heroic] education of the young was severe, harsh, and cruel, as in the case of the unlettered Lacedaemonians, who were the heroes of Greece. These people, in order to teach their sons to fear neither pain nor death, would beat them within an inch of their lives in the temple of Dianan, so that they often fell dead in agonies of pain beneath their fathers’ blows.”¹⁵ And what’s more, games and pleasures were strenuous and dangerous, such as wrestling and racing. Whereas the indulgence with which we now treat our young children produces all the tenderness of our [modern] natures. Metamorphosis of the body is certain to experience the bloodily drill, at the same time, the indomitable spirit of will power to the hardships and the enduring of hard work are forged. It goes without saying hale physical is the premise of undertaking.

¹¹ NS, para., 185.

¹² NS, para., 391.

¹³ NS, para., 401.

¹⁴ NS, para., 520, C6, M7, 524, 692.

¹⁵ NS, para., 670, 524, 62, 369, 371.

Plato uttered human souls do not die with their bodies but are immortal. Vico took the strength of the conviction that the souls of the dead were called *dii manes*, and they are spoken of as *deivei parentum* in the article on parricide of *Law of the Twelve Tables*. Furthermore, a stake must have been fixed as a burial marker upon or near the mound, which originally can have been nothing but a slight rounding over of the earth.¹⁶ Another etymological proof is, “The term ‘humanity’ has its origin in *humare*, to bury (Indeed *humanitas* in Latin comes first and properly from *humando*, burying.), and the Athenians, who were the earliest people in all the nations to bury their dead.¹⁷ It is true that human’s faculties appertain to the mind, sharp wit in referring them to the mind, but they have their roots in the body and draw their strength from it. The body is in connection with the mind with different grades, that is “the mind should always command and the body should have perpetually to obey.”¹⁸ Therefore, how to build up the body and cultivate the mind is a key issue to be pondered.

Stressed Moral Education

As for Vico, goodness, or the performance of good acts, takes place in the context of human society, and civil life must be conducted according to goodness. The final goal of education, without doubt, is to reach the goodness. This is just like opinion of Hegel and Herbart who stated that moral education is of vital importance. Religion alone has the power to make us practice virtue, as philosophy is fit for discussing it. And piety springs from religion, religion, which is actually fear of divinity. The heroic origin of the word “religion” was preserved in Latin which was derived from *religando*, binding, with reference to those fetters with which Tityus and Prometheus were bound bound on the mountain crags to have their hearts and entrails devoured by the eagle; that is, by the frightful religion religion of the auspices of Jove[387]. Hence an eternal property among all nations arises, that piety is instilled in children by the fear of some divinity.¹⁹ Though all peoples in the civil world began with religion, what religion commands is not merely justice but charity toward all mankind. Without religions, no commonwealths can be born, born, and if there were no commonwealths in the world there would be no philosophers in it.²⁰ Therefore poetic morality began with piety, which was ordained by providence to found the nations. Here is divine providence and further that it is a divine legislative mind. Since out of the passions human rely on his private advantage, they would live like beasts in the nature. Humans have made the civil institutions by which they may live in human society.²¹ Vico asserted, in regard to morality, the soul must be enticed by corporeal images and impelled to love. Therefore, religion acts to mitigate passions in the soul of the sage, so that those passions are transformed into virtues.

Revelation to Education of Our Time

It is clear that Vico foresees the loss of the human dimension with the rise of modern science. And further, he foretells that this loss will inevitably result in a loss of community, a loss of wisdom as well as moral. In a brief view of Vico’s humanistic educational thoughts, a concise revelation can be obtained as follows:

The first point is one of the most important functions of education is to cultivate the creativity. Vico’s theory of education is an anticipation of those modern theories of education which emphasizes the innate creativeness of the child—in the words of Elio Gianturco, theories that have as common features: “the defense of the child’s world against the oppression of the adult; the conscious certitude that the positive results of any educational method are dependent upon the recognition of the functional autonomy of childhood; the thesis of the predominantly nonrational nature of the child; the incongruity of a type of education that proposes the turning out of “erudite adolescents and senile children.”²² This is one way to help the child not to find the truth but to make it. All of these are quite close to some of the main tenets of contemporary education which have resulted from Piaget’s investigations. Hence, to know is to create.

Secondly, observing the nature of the child plays an essential part in education. This nature “ideally” follows the same development as that of mankind. Thus Vico makes it clear that imagination is not an irrational, antirational, or rational element, but prerational. This therefore precedes and presupposes rational activity. Moreover, education cannot rely on analytical methods, which impoverishes the polyhedric reality of life, reducing to bloodless scheme which is its substance. The scheme, the conceptual and universal structure (pattern), cannot concretize itself except by becoming a factual, historical reality.

¹⁶ NS,para.,526,529.

¹⁷ NS,para.,537.

¹⁸ NS,para., 523,630,694.

¹⁹ NS,para.,503.

²⁰ NS,para.,179,177.

²¹ NS,para.,133.

²² G.Vico.(1709). *On the Study Methods of Time*.(E. Gianturco,Trans.). Ithaca(1990),p.xxviii.

Thirdly, the physical, intellectual, emotional and ethical integration of the individual into a complete man is a broad definition of the fundamental aim for education. “Students’ education is so wrapped and perverted as a consequence, that, although they may become extremely learned in some respects, their culture on the whole (and the whole is really the flower of wisdom) is incoherent”.²³ As a result, the isolation in science and art, mind and body, sense and intellect, etc, should be called off.

What’s more, since factuality and truth, concrete and abstract, are identified in the historical process, educational methods should orient themselves toward an operational conception in which the children become aware of themselves and of culture as processes.

The method of probing into etymology is deep-rooted; the light of humanistic education is significant, which are the contributions of Vico to the contempora

²³ G. Vico.(1709). *On the Study Methods of Time*/(E. Gianturco, Trans.). Ithaca(1990), p.77.